

Report on Vermont's "School Readiness Assessment Initiative": 2005-2006

Assessing progress as a state or community on the outcome, "Children Are Ready for School," has posed a challenge, not only in Vermont but across the country. There is a diversity of views on what "readiness" consists of and how it should be measured. However, some consensus is emerging around several key ideas.

One is that "readiness" is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. *Children* need to be "ready" to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling, but *schools* also need to be prepared to meet the varied needs with which children enter school. *Communities* need to support children and families through providing access to high-quality early care and education programs, by supporting parents as children's first teachers, and by ensuring that all children receive adequate preventive and ongoing health care.

This report shares information from the fifth year of a multi-part assessment of "school readiness," conducted throughout Vermont in the 2005-06 school year. The assessment gathered information from kindergarten teachers on children's readiness in the fall of the year. It also collected information from school principals on their school's readiness for young children and their families. And it included health screening data collected by school nurses. The specific measures were the subject of extensive development and pilot-testing, drawing on the resources of the Vermont Early Childhood Workgroup, the Early Childhood Councils, and researchers at the University of Vermont.

Characteristics of the sample

The assessment was intended to include all children in public school kindergarten in Vermont, their teachers, and their principals. Valid data were received from 334 kindergarten teachers (81 percent of the 415 contacted). Teachers in all but two of Vermont's 60 supervisory unions responded. Child-level data were submitted on 5,337 kindergartners, which is 88 percent of estimated kindergarten enrollment. The "ready schools" survey of principals was not conducted this year.

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Number Responding</i>	<i>Estimated Pool of Possible Respondents</i>	<i>Percent Responding</i>
KG Teachers	334	415	80.5
Children (KG teacher report)	5,963	6,072	87.9

Of course, not all respondents answered every item on the instruments, so the number of valid responses varies somewhat by item.

Following is a summary of some key characteristics of children, teachers, and schools, as reported by the responding teachers and principals.

<i>Kindergarten Teachers</i>	
Mean length of experience with KG teaching (years)	11.0
Mean length experience with teaching (total) (years)	17.7

Have elementary education license	92.5
Have early childhood endorsement	27.5
Teach half-day program	19.2
Teach full-day, 5 days/wk. program	60.2
Teach full-day, partial-week program	2.1
<i>Kindergarten Students</i>	
Qualifies for special education services	9.1
Qualifies for ESL/Bi-lingual services	2.0
Qualifies for Sec. 504 services	1.0
Teacher reports on child's experience prior to kindergarten:	
Was in regulated early childhood program	71.7
Was not in regulated early childhood program	17.1
"Don't know"	8.9
Missing response	2.3

Teachers

Looking first at teachers who responded, their years of experience teaching kindergarten ranged from 0 to 33 years (*mean*=11.0), although a majority reported ten or fewer years' experience. They had an average of 18 years total teaching experience. 93 percent reported having an elementary education license, and 28 percent reported having an early childhood endorsement. The largest share of teachers (60 percent) taught a full-day, full-time program; 19 percent reported teaching a half-day program; two percent taught a full-day, partial week program; and 19 percent indicated some other type of schedule.

Children

Turning to characteristics of the kindergarten children, 9.1 percent were noted by their teachers as qualifying for special education services; 2.0 percent qualified for ESL/bi-lingual services, and 1.0 percent for 504 services. With regard to children's pre-school experiences, 72 percent of children were reported as having attended a regulated early childhood program prior to kindergarten; 17 percent were reported as not having had such experience, and for 9 percent teachers reported they did not know this information.

"Ready Kindergartners"

Kindergarten teachers were asked to rate individual children on 28 items encompassing the domains of "social and emotional development," "approaches to learning," "communication," "cognitive development and general knowledge," and "physical health and well-being." Teachers were asked not to assess children directly, but to rely on their (teachers') accumulated observations 4-6 weeks into the school year. These assessments were not intended as screening or diagnostic tools for individual children, but rather for purposes of creating an aggregate-level picture of children's readiness.

An example of items included under "social and emotional development" is "*Can meet/play with different children his/her own age.*" An example of items included under "approaches to learning" is "*Appears enthusiastic and interested in classroom*

activities.” An example of items included under “communication” is “*communicates needs, wants, or thoughts in primary language.*” An example of items included under “cognitive development and general knowledge” is “*shows awareness of how books are organized and used.*” An example of items included under “physical health and well-being” is “*demonstrates self-help skills (e.g., toileting, wiping nose, washing hands).*” Beginning in 2004-05, some items from earlier surveys were eliminated or re-worded, and other items were added to the “cognitive development & general knowledge” domain. Therefore, results cannot be directly compared to those of previous years.

Response-choices for most items were “don’t know,” “not observed,” “beginning,” “practicing,” and “performing independently.” Note that in the following table, the percentages listed for four of the domains indicate children who were rated as “practicing” or “performing independently” on *all* items within the domain.

Social and Emotional Development				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Can meet/play with different children	1.0	11.8	31.6	55.5
Uses problem-solving skills in social situations	4.8	24.5	40.6	29.5
Separates easily from caregiver	1.2	5.9	17.8	70.8
Appropriately expresses emotions	2.1	14.1	32.0	51.2
Adapts to transitions	1.2	10.5	29.3	58.8
Interacts positively with adults	0.5	7.9	26.1	65.2
Approaches to Learning				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Follows simple rules	1.4	1.4	31.9	52.5
Persists with self-directed activity	2.5	12.6	27.2	57.6
Appears enthusiastic	1.1	9.5	27.6	61.7
Uses a variety of problem-solving strategies	4.6	18.2	37.1	39.7
Pays attention	3.7	17.4	32.2	46.4
Knows how and when to use adults	1.9	14.2	35.9	47.9
Initiates activities in the classroom	4.3	14.7	31.7	48.9
Is curious	3.0	13.1	30.1	53.6
Communication				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Communicates needs	2.2	12.4	28.8	56.5
Understands simple directions	1.2	9.6	23.0	66.0
Engages in conversation	1.2	10.4	25.5	62.7
Cognitive Development/General Knowledge				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Shows awareness of how books are organized and used	2.1	11.2	25.2	61.3
Can recall and explain sequences of events	4.2	15.9	31.8	46.8
Recognizes name in print	1.1	7.6	16.5	74.6
Engages in imaginative play	2.9	8.0	24.2	64.5
Shows ability to discriminate and identify speech sounds	5.9	24.1	28.8	39.4
Can identify 10 or more letters of the alphabet	8.1	16.5	18.1	56.8
Uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas	6.2	20.5	26.8	45.0
Shows ability to count 5 or more objects using one-to-one correspondence	3.0	9.9	18.8	67.5
Can identify several basic geometric shapes	3.2	10.7	22.3	61.6

Physical Health and Well-Being				82.1
	Pct. "Not Observed"	Pct. "Beginning"	Pct. "Practicing"	Pct. "Performing Independently"
Demonstrates self-help skills	0.9	4.7	14.8	79.3
Child's ability to learn appears inhibited by:	Pct. "No"	Pct. "Seldom"	Pct. "Sometimes"	Pct. "Often"
illness	89.8	4.3	4.2	0.9
fatigue	81.8	6.3	9.0	2.0
hunger	91.7	3.3	3.5	0.7

It is noteworthy that on nearly all of the individual competencies rated by teachers, at least three-quarters of children were either "practicing" or "performing independently." This supports the aim that this be a measure of what beginning kindergartners can reasonably be expected to know and do.

There are eight items where fewer than 50 percent of kindergartners were rated as "performing independently":

- *uses problem solving skills in social situations*
- *uses a variety of problem-solving strategies*
- *pays attention*
- *knows how and when to use adults*
- *initiates activities in the classroom*
- *can recall and explain sequences of events*
- *shows ability to discriminate and identify speech sounds*
- *uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas*

Slightly less than half (44 percent) of children were rated at the "practicing" or "performing independently" levels for all items in each of the five domains. 10-18 percent each reached this level on one, two, three, or four domains; 6 percent were not achieving at this level across any of the five domains.

School health data are used to supplement the teacher reports on "physical health and well-being." Specifically, aggregate data on the vision/hearing screening status of first-graders, are reported by school nurses. Data from the 2005-06 school year were not available at the time of this writing, but will be included in the Agency of Human Services' 2006 *Community Profiles*.

The following chart shows domain scores for the statewide sample over time. Note that year-to-year comparisons may not be valid, because participation rates varied, and because items were not completely consistent over this time; in particular, additional items comprised the Cognitive Development & General Knowledge domain in 2005. Also, note that the Health & Well-Being domain has been assessed only for the past three years.

